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The Game before the Money

The Game before the Money

*Voices of the Men
Who Built the NFL*

JACKSON MICHAEL

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln & London

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*When you leave, you got your friends and your memories.
That's it. Hopefully, you cultivated both of them.*

WALT GARRISON, Dallas Cowboys

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PREFACE: OPENING KICKOFF

Before free agency, professional football was generally an unstable, unpredictable job, paying roughly a middle-class wage. It was seasonal work providing minimal retirement benefits and guaranteed to be temporary.

The game also offered an excitement and competitive challenge few occupations could match, not to mention hordes of cheering spectators, television coverage, and the accompanying notoriety. On the other hand, a career could end at any moment, outside of one's control.

Football first topped Gallup's poll as America's favorite sport in 1972, but baseball has long held the market on nostalgia. A delight in the personalities that played the grand old game—from Stan Musial's charm to Ty Cobb's sourness—cultivates baseball's endearing timelessness.

Football history, however, is rarely presented in such fashion. Many writers simply depict football players in gladiator-like stereotypes that are frequently inaccurate. Often the athletes' off-field demeanor stands in contrast to the gridiron's stoic image.

The Game before the Money is simply a book by a fan who dreamed of having a book like this upon his own bookshelf. I was frustrated by the dearth of pro football history presented in an authentic, genuine fashion, beyond the typical sportswriter angles of iron, blood, and guts. I wished to

know these men beyond stereotypes, learn about their lives, and celebrate their contributions to both the game and our country's culture.

When sports artist Robert Hurst heard my idea to do an oral history of pro football, he invited me to attend Bob Lilly's annual golf tournament at the Texas Sports Hall of Fame. That kick-started the project and led to interviews with Ken Houston, Elvin Bethea, and Walt Garrison.

I put my professional music career on hold and brainstormed a four-page dream list of players I hoped to interview. My good friend Karl Anderson tossed in a few vintage football cards of the players for good luck. Remarkably, I wound up contacting a large percentage of the names on the list. Meanwhile, I started working full time in a mailroom to pay the bills.

Assembling this book was a tremendous privilege. My objective was to document both football history and the individuals who played the game while conveying what it's like to be a pro football player. To get a range of perspectives, attempts were made to include stars as well as journeymen and players who only played a few seasons.

These pages contain the life stories of NFL legends, a history of football from their perspective, backstories to classic game moments, and glimpses into NFL life by those most capable of offering them—the men who created that history, lived those backstories, and experienced the NFL firsthand.

These men have won the Super Bowl and the Heisman Trophy. They've collected All-Pro and All-American honors and had their numbers retired by major universities and pro football teams. Several have earned spots in the Pro Football Hall of Fame; the majority are in the College Football Hall of Fame. Many have been featured on the covers of *Time* and *Sports Illustrated*. All have tremendous stories to tell.

I expected to learn a lot about football while compiling this anthology. I also unexpectedly learned a great deal about life.

Virtually every one of the players discussed here tied some sort of valuable life lesson to his story, either in a purposeful or an indirect way.

A grand set of elders spinning yarns speckled with wisdom is a wonderful gift. As you prepare to enter the locker rooms of Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry and step onto the field with Bronko Nagurski, Walter Payton, and Terry Bradshaw, know that in the hearts and minds of many of these men, success in football, business, and life are all connected.

The Game before the Money

FIRST QUARTER

Players Whose Careers Began before 1950

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Before the 1950s, the single-wing formation dominated football, pro players were usually paid per game rather than annual salary, and All-Americans like Al Wistert worked their way through college. African Americans were barred from the NFL between 1933 and 1946, an unwritten policy generally attributed to Redskins owner George Preston Marshall, although racial restrictions were standard at every level of competition throughout athletics. Many college stars eschewed pro football. Virtually every pro player worked a job outside of football, a trend that continued into the 1980s. Like starving artists, many risked professional and financial futures to pursue football.

World War II impacted young men's dreams of pro and collegiate careers. Pro players left their NFL coaches for drill sergeants; college athletes enrolled in the armed services rather than spring semester classes. Draft notices trumped scholarship offers in the mailboxes of high school graduates, replacing gridiron action with combat on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific.

Pro Football before the 1950s Timeline

- 1920 American Professional Football Association forms in Canton, Ohio.
- 1921 Fritz Pollard becomes first African American head coach.

- 1922 American Professional Football Association changes name to National Football League.
- 1925 Red Grange signs with the Chicago Bears. Grange receives percentage of gate receipts, later claims having received \$50,000 for one game and \$35,000 for another.¹
- 1933 No African Americans appear on NFL rosters for the first time in league history.
- 1935 Bidding war pushes Stan Kostka's rookie contract to \$5,000—similar to established star Bronko Nagurski's. Philadelphia owner Bert Bell suggests a player draft, limiting players to one pro football employment option.²
- 1936 NFL conducts its first player draft, Jay Berwanger being the top selection. He chooses a higher-paying career in the foam-rubber industry. Second-overall pick Riley Smith signs for \$250 per game.³ Average annual income for Americans working full time: \$1,184.⁴
- 1939 World War II begins; 638 pros end up joining war effort, 21 killed in action. NFL regular season attendance tops 1 million for first time.⁵
- 1946 Pro football reintegrates with four African American athletes. All-American Football Conference (AAFC) begins play. NFL expands west; Cleveland Rams move to Los Angeles.
- 1947 Leveraging competition between rival leagues, Charley Trippi negotiates \$100,000 four-year contract. Red Grange publicly declares contract as “playing for peanuts.”⁶ NFL makes first-overall draft pick the “Bonus Pick,” and team selecting is randomly determined.
- 1949 The NFL drafts African American athletes for the first time.

Notes

1. Charles Chamberlain, “Red Grange Says Trippi, Who Is Scheduled to Sign \$100,000 Pact with Cards, ‘Playing for Peanuts,’” *Florence Times*, January 18, 1947.
2. David J. Berri and Martin B. Schmitt, *Stumbling on Wins: Two Economists Expose the Pitfalls on the Road to Victory in Professional Sports* (Upper Saddle River NJ: FT Pearson Education, publishing as FT Press Delivers, 2010).
3. William Povletich, *Green Bay Packers: Trials, Triumphs and Tradition* (Madison WI: Wisconsin State Historical Society, 2012), 43.
4. George Thomas Kurain, ed., *Datapedia of the United States: American History in Numbers*, 3rd ed. (Lanham MD: Bernham Press, 2004), 121.
5. NFL Communications Department and Seymour Siwoff, 2012 *NFL Record and Fact Book* (New York: Time Inc. Home Entertainment, 2012), 533.
6. Chamberlain, “Red Grange Says.”

1

Chuck Cherundolo

Center/Linebacker

Penn State University

Undrafted

Cleveland Rams, 1937–1939

Philadelphia Eagles, 1940

Pittsburgh Steelers, 1941–1942, 1945–1948

3 All-Pro seasons

I went out for the high school team as a freshman and didn't make it. The shock of my next football season was when we pulled up and they said, "You're going to be a center."

No more carrying the ball than the man on the moon. My forte wasn't offense, though. Defense was what I liked, and I could really play it. You got a chance to hit somebody, and they couldn't hit you back. Offense is just the opposite: you hit somebody, and they'd hit you back.

I used to love that defense.

There was a Goody Lawless in Scranton. He came down to see me all the time and encouraged me to attend Penn State.

They didn't have scholarships. School cost about \$17 a month. Now you spend that much for breakfast. My dad was a coal miner and paid for it.

We didn't have that good of a team. Our record was lucky to break even.

I thought I'd love to play professionally but never realized I'd be in it that long. I started with the Cleveland Rams. One of the coaches was a good friend of mine and talked me into it. At that time my reputation wasn't that

good either. [*Laughs.*] He just said, “Why don’t you come with me?”

I said, “Heck yeah, I’ll go with you.”

I was only a kid at the time, about twenty years old. I was just glad to make the team.

I remember my first game. Who was that big back from the Bears? Nagurski. They used to tell me how great he was and all that crap. He came through the line and I tackled him. Boy, did it all come back. I knew what they were talking about. When you hit him, he’d hurt you. It never worked that way, you know? With him it would.

He knocked me around every time I hit him. At that time I only weighed about 185 pounds; he weighed about 220. He was at the end of his career, and I was just beginning mine. He was so great, I’m glad I wasn’t around before that. He’s the best football player I saw during my career, especially from that position.

When you were hurt, you wouldn’t play, but you *had* to be hurt. There were no prima donnas then. They didn’t have that many players. I think one year we went through with seventeen players. I played nine games in a row without coming out. I was beat up, stiff. Boy, you’d be stiff, but it was a great life. I wish I had it to live all over again.

I later played with Pittsburgh. I used to make \$150 a game. The last couple years I did pretty good. I didn’t set the world on fire, but I’d make \$12,000–\$15,000 a year. I was also a wine salesman and worked on commission for fifteen cents a case.

The Steelers didn’t pass much. We never had a great quarterback. Bobby Layne was the first one; that was after my time.

We had good runners. Bill Dudley was one of the best backs I’ve ever seen. What made him so good was his attitude. If he was hurt, he’d play. He was that type of kid. At that time he was a kid compared to me. He never cursed, never did anything bad. A real religious kid, and everybody

respected him. A guy like Bill Dudley, he'd probably make about \$500 a game.

When the war came, I enlisted in the navy. There was nothing much you could say, and I just left the Steelers. [Steelers owner] Art Rooney said, "Go ahead."

We had football teams in the service and played other teams in the military camps. Our team had a guy with a great reputation as a football player. He was our quarterback and captain. He played for Duquesne, a college in Pittsburgh. I wish I could remember his name. I used to remember the signals; why can't I remember stuff like that? I was thinking of him the other day.

I was in the service sixteen months: two seasons. I went back to playing center and linebacker with Pittsburgh.

On offense, I'd rather play center than any other position on the line. You start everything and you're right in the center of the action.

They tried to change how I threw the ball back on punts. Once you learn it, you're not going to jag over here or change it, and I had it down pretty good. I can't ever remember making a bad pass on a punt. They said, "We need more speed, more spiral."

I'd laugh because it's not easy. Very few people can do it.

The big thing is, when you grab that ball with your right hand, you got to almost squeeze the ball. That's the one that's controlling it. A lot of times, the left arm's just guiding it. I'm talking about a right-handed thrower, now. If you're left-handed, it's just the opposite.

You got to continuously do it and get the arms in that rhythm of going back, going back, going back. You got to throw it so many times you almost get dizzy, but that's the only way to learn.

Take and stick your fingers the way you hold the ball; everybody holds it different. I squeezed it with my right hand. I'd even do exercises to keep my right hand inspired.

After the snap, the guy is going to work on you, trying to knock you down. Once you learn that, though, you'll get that under control pretty good. You can get it off fast and get ready for him. Throw the ball back, come back on your heels, and you're ready for anything. The big thing is being ready for someone to hit you.

The coaches helped, but it just came natural. You can't teach what I knew from just being coached. They tell you how to do it, but the way you react is something different.

You see a guy in sports that has ability but never shows it. They try to coach him to do this and do that, but he still goes back to the same stuff. That's the difference between the fortunate and the unfortunate. The unfortunate never get it, whereas the lucky guy, you tell him once and he remembers. He reacts to it when it occurs.

Back then, you got to know the sportswriters, and you'd go out drinking with them. There's no better way to get to know a guy than to get drunk with him.

The team used to go down to Duquesne Brewery around the end of the season once a year. We'd get together and we'd have a helluva time. Drinking for free; that's what football's like, brother, to get in free. I'm so glad I lived that life. That was better than being a millionaire.

I went into coaching after playing, mostly with Pittsburgh. Then the Redskins with Bill McPeak, and the Philadelphia Eagles with Nick Skorich. They were good friends of mine. They needed a line coach, and there I was. It's tough on your kids because you're there two years and then you get fired or move on, and they have to leave all their friends behind.

That first year coaching, I thought I knew everything, and I didn't know anything. After two or three years, you learn that stuff. You learn how to use it too. That's the big thing. After five or six years, it was just like going back to school.

If I had the choice to go back to live in Pittsburgh, I'd never go. The weather's terrible there. That's why the people are so

great. Boy, they got great people there. Really down to earth. They just keep you going.

The Rooney family was one of the best families I've met, especially the old man. If I needed any money, all I had to do was call them, and they'd send it to me. They treated me like a son. That's why I played so long.

My nose was broken five times. I can reach up and slide it around. It never stopped growing, though. It's so big it's in the way.

The injuries I have now are just the ones I've caused myself. *[Laughs.]* Right now, I'm running around with this aluminum crutch. I got heavy shoes, and the left leg kicked the right ankle and broke the ankle. You get real clumsy when you hit that big 9-0. Never expected to, I'll tell you.

The bad thing about it, I'm losing my memory. I tried to say the Hail Mary the other night, and I forgot it. I didn't forget the whole thing, but I got to the third part, and I couldn't remember it to save my life. I said to myself, "Somebody's mad up there at you, fellow; get going."

You got to take life different than that. You start feeling sorry for yourself, and the first thing you know, you start acting sorry. I figure every time I start feeling like that, I think, "You got this far, you're lucky to be this far, so let it go at that." Nobody pays attention when you're complaining anyway.

Life is great; enjoy it, that's the big thing. Don't let anything get you down. Which is tough to do, but do it. Make up your mind that you're going to do it. I'm not kidding you; you can do it. You probably think you can't, but you can.

Don't let anybody talk you out of it either. If they get you once, they get you twice. If they get you twice, they got you forever. That's why when I say, "No," they finally get to know what I mean by "no." That's what you have to do. Just don't wear heavy shoes and fall down. *[Laughs.]*

I enjoyed it; it was a great life, and I thank the Lord every night that He let me have it. That's why I played so long.